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ABSTRACT

This document describes what a Web portal is (i.e., a Web site that allows access to many resources and services, such as instructional materials, lessons plans, news about current events, instant messaging and e-mail, and the ability to conduct controlled searches). Several questions that school administrators need to consider related to the management of Web portals are listed. Guidelines to help administrators select Web portal resources that support their districts' academic goals are presented. The guidelines are divided into two sections: content--what materials are available; and technical information--how it works. (MES)

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# Educational Web Portals: Guidelines for Selection and Use.

## A Guide to Help School District Administrators Assess the Quality, Usefulness and Reliability of Commercially Provided Educational Web Portals Designed for Schools

By. Jennifer Burke

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# Educational Web Portals: Guidelines for Selection and Use

*A guide to help school district administrators assess the quality, usefulness and reliability of commercially provided educational Web portals designed for schools*

SREB

*Jennifer Burke*

## What is an educational Web portal?

A Web portal is a Web site that allows access to many resources and services, such as instructional materials, lesson plans, news about current events, instant messaging and e-mail, and the ability to conduct controlled searches.

## Why should school administrators be concerned?

Every day companies claim to be "the new center of the classroom community" or "everything for K-12 education." School administrators need to ask key questions before they select commercial Web portals. Each commercial Web portal provides different resources and services, which may include lesson plans, instructional materials, e-mail services, discussion forums, filtering services, current news and classroom activities. Administrators need to assess their schools' needs for a portal and what features will be most useful for teachers, students and parents, and then determine whether resources and services offered by the vendor are appropriate to the schools' instructional needs and goals. Administrators need to assess the quality and appropriateness both of the portal as a whole and of each part of it.

Some commercial portal companies claim that what they offer is "free" to schools. Companies that offer "free" portals usually do not charge schools for access to the resources but may have advertisements on the sites or seek information about users. If it is a "pay-for-use" portal, the school needs to determine whether it is worth the cost. Will the school receive quality resources that otherwise are unavailable to its students and teachers?

> *"[A Web portal is] a Web site or service that offers a broad array of resources and services, such as e-mail, forums, search engines and online shopping malls. The first Web portals were online services, such as AOL, that provided access to the Web, but by now most of the traditional search engines have transformed themselves into Web portals to attract and keep a larger audience."*
>
> **Webopedia, http://webopedia.internet.com/TERM/W/Web_portal.html**

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School administrators need to consider several questions related to the management of portals:

- ☐ Are teachers already trained to use the resources available from this Web portal provider?
- ☐ Will the portal company provide necessary training for teachers?
- ☐ What initial implementation and ongoing costs will the school district and schools have to pay for this Web portal? What will the provider charge schools for access in subsequent years?
- ☐ How is the subscription price assessed? If the portal is "free" to schools, how is it funded?
- ☐ Does the portal provider have an easy-to-understand privacy policy and a way to address infractions by users?
- ☐ Will the Web portal be available for students to access from home?
- ☐ Is technical assistance provided to users through various options, including e-mail, telephone and online "chats"?
- ☐ Are there alternatives to commercial Web portals that could provide similar online materials?
- ☐ What is the likelihood that this company will continue to provide services to schools over the next three to five years?
- ☐ What provisions are offered to subscribers in the event that the portal no longer is available?

## What can be done?

*Web Portals: Guidelines for Selection* is intended to help school district and school administrators select Web portal resources that support their districts' academic goals. Because commercial portals vary greatly — for example, some are extensive content-specific sites, while others are sites with many organized links — it is difficult to assess their value and quality. Educators should use these guidelines to identify issues and raise questions before selecting and purchasing portals. These guidelines should be applied to each Web portal resource under consideration to determine how well it meets school needs.

## Summary

Implementing a portal that will be used by students, teachers and parents requires careful planning based on the needs of the entire school. Producers of online materials often make direct sales presentations to school and district personnel and conduct demonstrations at regional and national technology conferences. Presenters sometimes imply that the Web portal is free to schools, but the hidden cost may be targeted advertising, some of which may be intended to build brand loyalty among portal users. Administrators should weigh all options carefully when selecting portals through which students and teachers access instructional materials on the Internet.

> *"[Portals] serve as entryways to the Internet. … In their earlier incarnations, they functioned strictly as search sites — hot spots such as AltaVista, Excite, Lycos and Yahoo! — that brought organization to the Web's chaos. But now all the search engines and a few other ambitious sites are piling on new features at breakneck speed. They're jockeying to be the site you set as your browser's default home page, use as an entry point to other Web destinations, and return to day after day."*
>
> "The New Megasites: All-In-One Web Supersites," Matt Lake, PC Magazine, August 1998, www.pcworld.com/reviews/article.asp?aid=7202

## Content — What materials are available?

| Considerations | Yes | No | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| Content material provided by the portal company supports and is aligned with the school district's curriculum and instructional program. | | | |
| Information is error-free, bias-free, current and timely and is presented objectively. | | | |
| The portal and information contained there are updated frequently. | | | |
| Links to outside sites are relevant, authentic, up-to-date and appropriate. | | | |
| Concepts and vocabulary used are relevant to students' abilities (but may be differentiated by age or intended audience). | | | |
| Images and graphics are bias-free. | | | |
| Text throughout the site uses correct grammar, spelling and sentence structure. | | | |
| Designers and researchers who provide content for the site are experienced and reputable in their fields. | | | |
| Contact information for the portal company is provided, and users are encouraged to suggest improvements. | | | |
| Interaction through the portal is compatible with the physical and intellectual maturity of the intended audience. | | | |
| Topical information adequately covers the subject for the intended audience. | | | |
| The progression of topics within the portal and with external links is logical and relevant. | | | |
| The portal offers information that is not readily available from other sources or offers unique ways of accessing the materials. | | | |
| Materials on the portal are tailored for various users (students, parents and teachers) who have different needs and abilities. | | | |

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## Technical information — How does it work?

| Considerations | Yes | No | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| Technical requirements are defined clearly so that the school can access and use the portal. | | | |
| Classrooms have adequate, reliable Internet connections to use online resources. | | | |
| If the product requires the installation of proprietary software, this software will work seamlessly with school or district networks. | | | |
| The portal does not interfere with online instruction from other providers. | | | |
| The local area network's or wide area network's security system (firewall) is compatible with the portal and any links to outside sources. | | | |
| Images and text on the portal load in a reasonable time. | | | |
| The portal uses easily recognizable icons, menus and directional symbols that encourage independent use. | | | |
| Links within the portal allow easy navigation through the site. | | | |
| The site uses standard multimedia formats. | | | |
| Users easily can print or download text or graphics. | | | |
| The portal follows good graphic-design principles. Screen displays are uncluttered and concise. | | | |
| All graphics have captions, labels or legends. | | | |
| The text size is readable and appropriate for the intended audience. | | | |
| Graphics and art are functional and appropriate for the material presented; they are not just decorative. | | | |
| Information is presented through a mix of text, motion, still images and sound. | | | |
| The presentation of information stimulates imagination and curiosity and allows interaction. | | | |
| Product advertising, if any, is not intrusive and does not conflict with school policy. | | | |
| The portal can be accessed by physically challenged students or is "Bobby-approved" by the Center for Applied Special Technology.* | | | |

* "Bobby" is a free, Web-based program (www.cast.org/bobby/) provided by the Center for Applied Special Technology. The program identifies and repairs significant barriers to access of Web pages by people with disabilities.



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